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ABSTRACT

Both males and females are mythologized in children's literature. The internalization of these myths has been found to have far-reaching implications for intellectual achievement and individual functioning in a democracy. Numerous studies have indicated that these sexual myths are destructive to females' self-image. Eleanor Maccoby, in her study on "Sex Differences in Intellectual Functioning," found that there is a tendency for the more passive-dependent children to perform poorly on a variety of intellectual tasks and for independent children to excel. The study further suggests that for girls and women the evidence consistently points to masculinity as a correlate of intellectuality. Several studies of children's books reveal that girls are characterized as dependent upon others; they consistently take an inactive role. The role of women in literature is only one aspect of sexism in our society. However, aware parents and educators can demand that publishers provide more than token elimination of sexism in children's books. (LL)

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# SLEEPING BEAUTY AWAKES:

## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND SEX ROLE MYTHS

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SLEEPING BEAUTY AWAKES:
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KAREL ROSE

" In due time, the prince carried his bride away to his own kingdom where they lived in great happiness ever after." And so ends the two centuries old fairy tale, "The Sleeping Beauty." In almost the same spirit, countless modern "realistic" stories begin and end. What is extraordinary about these contemporary renditions of reality is that the characters do not masquerade as fairies or other supernatural beings, but are frequently represented pictorially and literally as the personification of the American Dream. The female, usually a homemaker, distinguished by her apron, appears to be doing her job of (s)mothering and housekeeping twenty four hours a day, three hundred sixty five days a year, for seventy year, if she lives that long. Her efforts almost always commit her to the walls of her house; for it is most unusual to see mother doing many of the things that she really does: driving a car, reading, weeding the garden, going to school, voting, engaging in political activities or working on a non-home related job. She's really a fairy tale character this mother. The facts are that thirty-three million women in the United States work; 42.6% employed outside the home. No wonder that children often identify more closely with totally mythical characters like a fairy godmother or a passing witch. These females do things; they make changes; and in many ways they're more realistic that that colorless lady who never seems to remove her apron.

Males as well are mythologized. As boys and men, they are depicted with little or no home responsibilities, except along stereotyped lines. Boys may be taught the intricacies of re-wiring a lamp, while girls are given the jobs related to cleaning the house. For the boy whose home life does not follow this pattern, and who does assist in cleaning the house as well as the car, the males in many children's books are as fanciful as Rumplestilskin. The fact is that children's trade and text books are permeated by an unreality that has far reaching implications for intellectual

achievement and individual functioning in a democracy.

Literature reflects societal expectations, and certain hallowed ideas about sex roles are carefully programmed into children's reading materials. It is not that adults have conspired to perpetuate sexual myths, but that they, too, are reflecting the traditional, societal approach to women. There is every evidence, however, that our society is changing, and attitudes and sex roles are being re-evaluated. Interpersonal flexibility is becoming more highly respected in our society.[1] The qualities of courage, perseverance and creativity, traditionally attributed to boys in children's literature, are now being considered as valuable traits for girls as well. A new genre of book is developing in which parents and teachers are encouraging both boys and girls to achieve, to pursue intellectual activities and to choose from a variety of options.

Since the fairy tale version of reality in children's books is under attack these days, and some segments of the society seem to be responding to the sex-role revolution, it might be helpful to raise some questions:

(1) Have our expectations about sexual roles and family life styles altered in the last decade? If so, do children's materials reflect this change?

(2) Are the sex role expectations presented in most children's books becoming less and less relevant to the youngster's real life situations?

(3) Is it the responsibility of educators to serve as catalytic agents and translate changing societal expectations for children and their parents?

Obviously, the questions are offered as a rhetorical exercise. Yes-alternate family patterns are becoming more prevalent. Yes-traditional children's books are in many ways losing their relevance. Yes-educators with courage and conviction have the burden of identifying the fairy tale qualities in realistic materials and helping children to move away from sex role stereotyping.

To catalogue in detail the many sexual myths which permeate children's books is no longer the first order of business. The job has been done, and well. There is a growing sensitivity to the narrow channeling that has been characteristic of most children's reading materials. The damage to individual growth when girls are presented as passive, immobile and even invisible, is slowly being recognized. Cherry Ames and Elsie Dinsmore are on their way out. Boys as well, have engendered deep concern among educators, school boards and women's groups. For in many books, the males must carry the burden of perpetual achievement, along with lifelong emotional and physical strength. The stereotyped sex roles of boys and girls as presented in books and the media, very often contradict the day-to-day realities of this world, and offer only a fairy tale type characterization.

Intellectual Success of Females and Trade Books

Most of all females are victimized in children's reading materials for they are denied adventure and achievement by the irrelevant stereotyping. Numerous studies have suggested that the internalization of sexual myths is destructive to the female's self-image. Being feminine according to the fairy tale construct means being dependent, fragile, inactive and safe. Almost a patronizing device designed to protect females from themselves. For the assertive, achievement-oriented girl faces rejection; not only from men, but from women as well, who are made anxious by her defection. The paradox comes full circle when we realize that our society cherishes these action-oriented qualities, and that these attributes may be directly related to a high level of intellectual behavior.

Eleanor Maccoby in her study on "Sex Differences in Intellectual Functioning" found that there is a tendency for the more passive-dependent children to perform poorly on a variety of intellectual tasks and for independent children to excel.[2]

The study further suggests that for girls and women the evidence consistently points to masculinity as a correlate of intellectuality. Masculinity, defined from a cultural perspective; for it merely means that some of the interests and activities of the male are preferred by the female. Sontag's study similarly shows that independence has an effect on IQ.[3] Matina Horner, the thirty-three year old psychologist, president of Radcliffe sums up the early effects of the acculturation process on academic achievement by referring to Sally from the Peanuts cartoon, who remarks, "I never said I wanted to be someone. All I want to do when I grow up is be a good wife and mother. So--why should I have to go to kindergarten?"

Several studies of children's books reveal that girls, if not invisible, are dependent upon others; they consistently take an inactive role. The females are not called upon to make crucial decisions, and are frequently led by men or boys away from danger, and adventure as well. In Lenore Wetzman's study[4] of Caldecott award books, she found that the overwhelming number of females are passive, often waiting to be rescued by the fairy tale prince. The most wonderful Caldecott books are about the adventures of boys: Sylvester,[5] Goggles,[6] and Obadiah.[7] Even the exciting mice are males: Frederick is ingenious,[8] and Alexander has magical powers.[9] On the other hand, the female characters in these prize winning picture books are caricatures of real girls; their clothing is restrictive and cumbersome, the setting is indoors, and their activities are best performed as spectators. Mothers in these books designed for very young children do not work. Yet the reality is that six million preschool children have mothers who do work outside the home.

The Weitzman study calls attention to this point. For in these award books, women play only traditional feminine service roles. The girls cook and serve the

boys who have frequently returned from some adventurous activity. This over-idealized notion that femininity is synonomous with dependence and passivity is inconsistent with intellectual success for girls.

Participatory Democracy and the Readers

Responsibility. Resourcefulness. Ingenuity. Persistence. These are some of the qualities which assist youngsters to function effectively and prepare them to participate in a democratic form of government. Yet, the females, young and old, in children's readers are for the most part denied these attributes. In Dick and and Jane as Victims, a study of sex stereotyping in children's readers, some startling statistics were compiled.

> In studying 2,760 stories in 134 books, clever girls appear 33 times clever boys 131....Persevering boys are a dime a dozen. Persistent girls are....a rare specimen. The actual score is 169 for the boys to 47 for the girls....Nothing in the readers encourages girls to persever.[10]

The leadership roles belong to the males in these readers, and all the concommitant intellectual and emotional growth. Females are hindered from developing the skills necessary for effective functioning in a democracy. Yet according to Robert Hutchins, this should be one of the prime objectives of our schools. It is vital to a democratic community that schools open new worlds to the young, and get them out of the rut of the place and time in which they were born.[11] Our readers instead of expanding upon life's opportunities, offer closure as the alternative to the female population.

Biographical material, as well, fails to do the job, for the role models are few. The readers have an overwhelming number of male biographies; there is a blanket of silence about women whose lives have had political implications.[12]

Even a cursory survey of the biographies in the neighborhood library will reveal that few women, particularly political women, are ever represented. The exciting lives recorded for posterity belong to the men. How can girls discover and evaluate the qualities of well-known women they admire, if there is a veritable blackout of information?

Similarly, a survey of children's encyclopedias turned up examples of significant omissions of women from history.[13] Women were presented in stereotyped portayals and the emphasis was upon homemaking to the exclusion of other roles. Particularly significant for the question of the development of attitudes and skills necessary for effective democratic participation is the glorification of males in the encyclopedias. The message is clear; it is the masculine opinion that is of primary importance. Even the language suggests this perspective; the encyclopedias speak of cameramen, policemen and congressmen. Hypothetical situations are almost always presented with the male pronoun: "If a man earned $8,000 last year, and $10,000 this year....." As this study notes, Nobody Knows Her Name, for females are wives or daughters or mothers of some clearly named and identified male. Even royal women are often denied a name. Thus the child reads of King Frederick and his wife. Since children take language literally and at face value, they cannot feel that Frederick's wife is of much value. All governmental responsibilities obviously fall to the king.

We all recognize that what children read is only one aspect of the spectrum; for schools neither create nor abolish sexism. However, aware parents and educators can demand that publishers provide more than token elimination of sexism in children's books. The Kalamazoo, Michigan Public Schools refuse to buy any text-books until they meet new guidelines.

Until the consciousness of more people is raised, women will continue to be represented mythologically. Many girls who accept the prevailing stereotype will have low aspirations and depressed goals, for the consistency of the image till very recently has contributed to its pervasive effect. Sandra and Daryl Bem suggest that the evidence that the socialization mechanism has been such a smashing success is that women themselves remain unaware that they are victims of a non-conscious ideology.[14] We have a big job ahead of us, and we might as well start right away. After all many attitudes about sex roles are internalized by the age of four!

* Please Note:

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Philip Slater, "Parental Role Differentiation," in The Family: Its Structure and Functions, edited by Rose L. Coser, New York: St.Martin's, 1964

[2]Eleanor E. Maccoby, "Sex Differences in Intellectual Functioning," in The Development of Sex Differences, Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1966, p.35.

[3]I.W. Sontag, C.T. Baker, & V.A. Nelson, Mental growth and personality development: development: A longitudinal study. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 1953,23, No. 68.

[4]Lenore J. Weitzman, Deborah Eifler, Elizabeth Hokada & Catherine Ross, "Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children" The American Journal of Sociology, Vol.77, No.6, May, 1972.

[5]William Steig, Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969.

[6]Jack Ezra Keats, Goggles!, Toronto, Macmillan, 1969.

[7]Brinton Turkle, Thy Friend, Obadiah, New York, Viking, 1969,

[8]Leo Lionni, Frederick, New York, Random House, 1967.

[9]Maurice Sendak, In the Night Kitchen, New York, Harper & Row, 1970.

[10]Women on Words and Images (WOW), Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers. Princeton, New Jersey: Women on Words and Images,1972.

[11]Robert M. Hutchins, "The Schools Must Stay," The Center Magazine, Volume VI, No1 January/February 1973, p.19,

[12]Women on Words and Images, loc. cit., P.29.

[13]Linda Kraft, "Lost Herstory: The treatment of women in Children's Encyclopedias," School Library Journal, January, 1973, Vol. 19, No.5.

[14]Sandra L. and Daryl J. Bem, "Training the Woman to Know Her Place: The Power of a Nonconscious Ideology," in Roles Women Play: Readings Toward Women's Liberation, edited by Michele Garskof, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1971.